

Young, White, Happy Girls: How Stock Photographs Depict  
Fashion Designers and Why it Matters  
Sara Jablon, Iowa State University  
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Summary by Andrea Mason

Sara Jablon, a PhD candidate, gave a presentation based on a paper she had written for a research class at Iowa State University which centers on the distorted way fashion designers are depicted through stock photography, why this is important, and how it impacts the way the fashion world is seen by others.

To begin, Sara explained to us what stock photography is. Stock photos are images that magazines, websites, businesses and corporations can access to source content for their advertisements or media. They pay for stock photos and use them as their own. Stock photos are meant to illustrate an entire topic or theme both efficiently and quickly in a universal manner, resulting in them being idealized and generic images. On the surface, this does not seem so dangerous. But Sara explained that it matters because of Cultivation Theory, which is the theory that the images we see repeatedly in media ultimately influence our behavior. With this theory grounding her research, Sara's first research question for her thesis was, "How does stock photography depict fashion designers?"

Sara visited the three largest stock photography websites today, iStock, Fotolia, and Shutterstock, and searched the term "fashion designer" under the "most popular" search feature. Her sample included 72 photos featuring 75 people. Out of the 75 people, 93% of them were women, 87% were white, and 84% appeared to be in their 20's. Sara explained that this shows that all three stock photo websites think fashion designers are young, white, attractive females. Additionally, the majority of the women shown were surrounded by their work but sitting down, looking at the camera and smiling, unlike the way male designers were depicted in stock photography. The 7% of male designers shown were all standing up, looking at their work, and had concentrated, serious demeanors. The captions of pictures with male designers said things like, "Confident man working as fashion designer" while captions of female designers said, "Young attractive female fashion designer leaning on office desk." Sara explained that the subtle differences between the way males and females are depicted doing the same job portray women as submissive and men as dominant.

Using what she had found in her study, Sara went on to answer her second research question, which was, "How does stock photography of fashion designers differ from photos presented by professional designers of themselves?" Comparatively, Sara explained that 97% of the people in her stock photo sample were smiling, while 56% of the designers in her professional sample, which comprised 53 photos of current American designers, were not smiling. Another big difference was the use of fashion references, which include tape measures, patterns, sketches, and mannequins. Most professional designers were set nowhere specific, with no reference to fashion, while almost all of the female designers in stock photos were surrounded with these props. Sara concluded from all of these differences that stock photos show fashion design as a field dominated by happy, white women, but in reality, men hold more power and positions in the field. Sara found stock photography was putting forth an "idealized" generic version of fashion design.

She explained how this matters. The depiction of fashion designers through stock photography, using Cultivation Theory, means that people seeing the photos may internalize the idea that anyone who does not fit the tiny subset stock photography shows cannot be a fashion designer. They may conclude that they are excluded from fashion if they do not fit the picture. Additionally, the way stock photos depict women as always happy, smiling and able to stop their work for a picture implies that women are not and do not need to be taken seriously as designers. Stock photography is media we see all the time around us, and Sara says that until we bring diversity and equality into the images we see, we are not making decisions based on reality.